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Social and human rights questions

Statement submitted by the Society for Post-Traumatic Stress Studies, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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The commitment of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies (ISTSS) to the international dimensions of traumatic stress renders its status at and involvement with all relevant aspects of the work of the United Nations an integral part of its mission.

An estimated 300 million people are suffering from mental and neurological disorders. Approximately 80 per cent of the world's mentally disabled population lives in developing countries. The world confronts a "largely unheralded crisis" in mental health problems that threatens international political and economic stability and "betrays the humanity" of tens of millions of its victims, according to a 1995 report by the Harvard Medical School's Department of Social Medicine.

In addition, well over 40 million of the world's refugees and internally displaced persons, the victims of civil wars, run the risk of depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder and other forms of mental distress.

Details of the Harvard report were presented to the then United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali. He stated: "This Report ... reminds us of the great human suffering caused by mental illness ... the international community has risen to many challenges in the past. Now it must do the same [for] mental health ... The challenge is to combine concern for mental health ... with humanitarian assistance and protection efforts. Development policies must ... protect and promote mental health".

The Harvard report stresses the interconnectedness of mental health problems and of psycho-social pathologies such as violence, alcoholism, abuse of women and children, and underlying social conditions such as poverty and discrimination. In the words of former Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali: "Medical and social issues which are often viewed separately must be dealt with as a whole ... the priority of mental health must be heightened ... resources must expand ... responsibilities must be recognized more completely".

The Charter of the United Nations calls for a "reaffirmation of the dignity and worth of the human person". Article 62 of the Charter charges the Economic and Social Council with health and related matters.

The attainment of full mental health for all people is recognized in General Assembly resolution 46/119 of 17 December 1991 on the protection of persons with mental illness and the improvement of mental health care. The resolution's 25 principles define fundamental freedoms and basic rights of persons with mental illness. Later instruments, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, recognize that mentally disabled persons should enjoy a decent life in conditions that ensure dignity and promote self-reliance. Every year, on 10 October, the United Nations observes Mental Health Day.

The contributions of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat and the World Health Organization (WHO) in dealing with traumatized populations have been well documented.

Ms. Graca Machel, in a report entitled "The impact of armed conflict on children", points out, "armed conflict affects all aspects of child development – physical, mental and emotional ... All phases of emergency and reconstruction assistance programmes should take psycho-social considerations into account".

Recent United Nations international conferences, including the World Summit for Social Development (1995), the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), and the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) (1996), confirm the commitment to the full realization of the highest attainable standards of physical, mental and environmental health and stress the importance of not only physical but also mental health throughout the lifespan.

United Nations programmes include the following provisions:

1. A major initiative to upgrade the quality of mental health services in countries of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America;
2. The care of the mentally ill should be provided for in international, national and regional plans, and adequate budgetary allocations must be made available;
3. A cadre of well-trained mental health professionals is necessary to mental health programmes to design and implement training programmes and supervise the care of the traumatized and mentally ill;
4. Psycho-social programmes should incorporate knowledge and respect for local culture and tradition;
5. Broad initiatives to control the causes and consequences of violence should be combined with policies to reduce poverty.

A major initiative to upgrade the quality of mental health services is only possible by strengthening the

partnership within the United Nations system with non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The recently established NGO Committee on Mental Health is of vital importance, bringing together NGOs from both developed and developing countries. The challenges we must face in the mental health field are overwhelming and the resources available are limited. NGOs and the United Nations must confront an important and arduous task.

ISTSS would like to make the following observations:

1. The training programmes of United Nations personnel, with specific emphasis on reaching people with adequate services, including trauma treatment, should be expanded;

2. Improved cooperation between relevant entities such as WHO, UNHCR, the Office of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, the Department of Humanitarian Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, UNICEF and United Nations peacekeeping forces is necessary;

3. The United Nations should strengthen its emergency preparedness at all levels. Monitoring and evaluation efforts seem to have fallen short and the United Nations should set priorities and maintain accountability and evaluate emergency interventions;

4. Not enough attention is given to the provision of services for traumatized help-givers, including United Nations personnel in the field;

5. ISTSS agrees with concerns expressed by some delegations that "loud" emergency situations, such as armed conflict, draw the attention of the international community, while "silent" emergencies, such as poverty, famine and homelessness – which claim more victims each year – are largely forgotten.

ISTSS and other members of the NGO Committee on Mental Health recommend that the Economic and Social Council, in all its considerations, include specific statements recognizing the fact that a destructive impact on mental health is inherent in situations such as war, poverty, natural and man-made disasters, oppression, violence, and all conditions that destroy the quality of life. We further recommend that provisions be included for mental health and traumatic stress services when considering solutions to problems.

ISTSS would like to join other NGOs involved in the mental health field in a joint effort to work with the Economic and Social Council to advance the situation of the world's mentally disabled persons – especially those living in the developing world.